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ZNY CCCCC ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8946
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK 2896
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2269
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 1947
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 5194
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 2117
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 5425
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 9018
RUEHTC/AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE 0748
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 6594
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU 1784
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 2157
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 0632
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2401
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 4410
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC
RUEKJCS/DIA WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 000270

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS; DEPT PLEASE PASS TO USAID/AME CHERYL
JENNINGS; BANGKOK FOR USAID/RDMA; PACOM FOR FPA;
TREASURY FOR OASIA: SCHUN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/11/2019
TAGS: [E A I D](#) [E C O N](#) [P G O V](#) [P R E L](#) [B M](#)
SUBJECT: BURMA: GOB LIMITING VISAS IN MAY

REF: A. RANGOON 175
[1](#)B. RANGOON 223
[1](#)C. RANGOON 232

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Classified By: Economic Officer Samantha A. Carl-Yoder for Reasons 1.4
(b and d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) has informed the diplomatic community that the GOB will not be issuing any more visas for official foreign visitors during the remainder of May, but indicated that visas may be issued after June 1. MOFA has yet to justify this policy. Diplomats and UN officials suspect that the Foreign Affairs Policy Committee (FAPC), which is responsible for approving visas for foreign visitors, is deluged with applications since it took over Nargis-related visa duties from the Tripartite Core Group (TCG) in March (Refs A and B). Others note that May, particularly the end of the month, is politically sensitive, given the scheduled expiration of Aung San Suu Kyi's current period of house arrest. Despite the GOB's stated May visa policy, some visitors from South Korea, Bangladesh, Singapore, Australia, and the U.S. have received visas to travel in mid-May. The Singapore Ambassador, Dean of the Diplomatic Corps, has raised the issue with several Ministers at the request of at least the UK, Australia, and the U.S., noting the negative effects and optics of the GOB's policy. End Summary.

No Visa for You!

12. (C) The Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed us verbally on May 6 that the GOB will not issue any more visas to official foreign visitors during May. MOFA did not provide a justification. Our diplomatic colleagues from Australia, Italy, the UK, Singapore, and France confirmed also receiving the word. According to AusAID Country Director Bernard Pearce, MOFA told the Australian Embassy that it should "not bother to apply for visas until after May 30"; all visa requests should include a detailed itinerary; MOFA will only issue single-entry visas; and MOFA will need up to four weeks to process a visa. Counselor Vanessa Chan confirmed that the Singapore Embassy is also having difficulties obtaining visas, despite having a close relationship with the Prime Minister.

13. (C) While the policy appears directed toward diplomats, UN Resident Coordinator Bishow Parajuli told us that INGOs are also having visa difficulties. As of April 30, the UN and INGOs had 188 visa requests pending, including both visas for Nargis work and general operations. In April, only 38 visas for the UN and INGOs were approved, he stated. Many INGO and UN officials are working in Burma on expired visas, an issue Parajuli raised during the May 4 Tripartite Core Group (TCG) meeting. In response, TCG Chair Kyaw Thu requested the international community to "have patience," as he works with relevant GOB Ministries to establish a systematic new approach for visa requests. Parajuli has alerted UN headquarters and the UN Office of Humanitarian Affairs in New York, and has requested a meeting with the Prime Minister to address the visa issue.

14. (C) Dean of the Diplomatic Corps Singapore Ambassador

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Robert Chua has raised the issue informally with several high-ranking Ministers who reportedly have the PM's ear, noting the negative optics, particularly the bad signal for post-Nargis donors and for the USG policy review. Chua told the Charge that not all diplomatic missions are concerned though. (We presume he was referring in particular to China, Russia, and a few of the ASEANs.) Chua said he is working to gain consensus among his ASEAN colleagues.

But some exceptions

15. (C) Confusingly, the GOB is still granting some official visas this month. The South Korean Minister for Rural Development visited Burma May 7-8, and the Bangladeshi Foreign Minister is scheduled to arrive for bilateral talks on May 14. It is not clear when the GOB issued those visas. The Australian Embassy confirmed on May 11 that, while they are having difficulties receiving visas for replacement staff, they just received approval for a Department of Foreign Affairs Office Director to visit Burma next week. We just received word that the GOB has approved the visas for a GAO team, also for next week.

Diplomats Speculate on GOB Rationale

15. (C) The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has yet to explain the rationale behind the new visa policy. According to Parajuli, one possible reason for the delay is because the 26-member Foreign Affairs Policy Committee (FAPC), which approves visas for incoming diplomats and officials, has been deluged with applications since it took over Nargis-related visa duties from the TCG in March (Refs A and B). With more than 200 pending visa applications from UN, NGOs, and embassies, the FAPC cannot handle the volume. A GOB Minister told Parajuli that the GOB, in preparation for the 2010 elections, does not want outsiders wandering around the country, possibly influencing the election process. A Burma MFA official noted to us, when discussing the possibility of CODEL visits, that, while the GOB is agreeable to the visits in principle, late May is "politically sensitive." The

source did not elaborate, but that period coincides with the anniversary of the 2003 Depayin incident that began Aung San Suu Kyi's current period of house arrest as well as the expiration of the current term of her detention.

Implications of New Visa Policy

¶6. (C) The GOB's May visa policy may have far-reaching implications, diplomats told us. Pearce confirmed that the multi-donor boards of the Three Diseases Fund (3DF) and the Livelihood Trust Fund (LIFT) have postponed their donor meetings because board members cannot obtain visas to Burma. Parajuli observed that donors may be unwilling to fund the UN's Post-Nargis Recovery Plan (PONREPP) if they cannot monitor and evaluate funded programs. DFID Health Officer JQia Kemp intimated that the new visa policy reflects poorly on the GOB's pending Round 9 Global Fund grant and its ability to provide "free and unfettered" access to project sites.

Comment

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¶7. (C) We have raised the visa issue with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and have urged a concerted diplomatic-corps effort to reverse the situation. If, as the one Minister explained, the motive is to limit foreigner access in the lead-up to 2010 elections, the visa effects could be quite long-term. If the explanation is simply bureaucratic inertia or political sensitivities about late May, the situation could improve soon. We encourage potential official visitors to remain flexible in planning for visits in June and beyond.

DINGER